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The Open-Ended Question

## The Open-Ended Question

Kathy Checkley

**Open-ended questions help students explore possibilities, clarify thinking, and produce evidence-based conclusions.**

*There are no multiple choice questions in life.* This observation has been a rallying cry for educators who believe their instruction and assessment practices should help students become comfortable with ambiguity. These educators assert that students must learn to evaluate many possible solutions to an array of issues. Only then will they be prepared to successfully negotiate an increasingly complex world. There are many ways students can develop this invaluable skill. One effective way is by being asked to construct written, evidence-based responses to open-ended questions.

Justin Stygles believes that students should not learn history by memorizing names, dates, and timelines. Instead, the 5th and 6th grade teacher at Guy E. Rowe Elementary School in Norway, Maine, wants his students to understand the kinds of questions that confronted those living in bygone eras. "We talk about the necessity of looking at multiple sources and multiple perspectives." Stygles brings together a wide variety of materials for his students to consider: nonfiction texts, primary source documents, art, and even music.

Stygles has found that song lyrics help develop his students' ability to synthesize information and summarize their understanding of historical events—the first steps toward constructing responses to the open-ended questions he eventually poses. Take westward expansion and the Trail of Tears. The lyrics to the 1987 pop song "Cherokee" offer one interpretation of what happened during the forced removal of Native Americans from the foothills of the Smoky Mountains. In guided whole-class and subsequent small-group discussions, students dissect the meaning of each stanza. Next, they consider additional materials on the topic, including a video from the National Park Service and a diary entry from John G. Burnett, a soldier who watched the removal. Students then must describe, with evidence from each source, how the additional materials support the song lyrics. The task is difficult, Stygles states, because it requires students to "delineate what is going to work—they can't just accept it all." Most students want a one-to-one match. Instead, they must "select the most relevant material and ask 'Which is going to reinforce my point better?'"

The ultimate application of these skills comes when Stygles asks his students to write a response to this open-ended question: *Was the government justified in removing Native Americans from their ancestral homelands?* "The immediate answer is a resounding 'no,' but then I remind students that they need to validate that point of view," says Stygles. That leads to even more investigation. "We look at the Indian Removal Act of 1830. We look at Andrew Jackson and his worldview. Then I ask again, 'Was it justified?'"

"It's not enough to know what's in the text—you can't just retell—you have to think about it," states Susan Brookhart, who has studied classroom assessment practices for more than 20 years. The ability to provide a supported argument to an open-ended question "is certainly a skill that students will use all the rest of their schooling—in life, for that matter. It's what we think of when we think about an educated person."

Kathy Glass, author of *Complex Text Decoded* (ASCD, 2015) agrees. Justifying our positions "is something we're called upon to do in all aspects of our lives"—during job interviews, for example, or when we need to supply the boss with a rationale for a business proposal.

According to Glass, using close-reading strategies to teach content and critical-thinking skills, as Stygles does, makes terrific sense. The practice is part of her three-pronged approach to helping students construct sound, written responses to open-ended questions. Students must learn to

1. Mine the text;
2. Understand the task; and
3. Write with purpose and clarity.



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## Mining the Text

"Students should know how to closely read text of any length," Glass asserts. This includes those passages on which standardized test questions are based. Teaching students to annotate, says Glass, is a must.

Start with helping them understand the difference between simply highlighting material and note taking, says Stygles, who recalls watching one student, with yellow highlighter in hand, mark virtually everything on the page. "She wasn't yet thinking about what piece of information would best support her point of view." Stygles told the student to go back and indicate why she thought her marked segments were noteworthy. "I tell my students that you use the highlighter to signify the section that's important; the notes in the margin tell us why it's important."

Darlene Eirish-Schofield, an 8th grade English teacher at Pawling Middle School in Pawling, New York, says that she, too, has "happy-highlighting students." Unfortunately, when students look at the material later, they may not remember why they marked it. Eirish-Schofield, therefore, asks her students to write in the margins and explain why they highlighted a passage. "Students may choose a line but they cannot choose it indiscriminately," she says. "They have to tell me why they chose it." Students must explain that the text reveals the personality of a character, for example, or that the marked segment conveys the text's theme. Highlighted segments can also identify a particular point that supports a student's conclusion.

Such textual evidence helps convince others that the claims students made about what they read was true, says Eirish-Schofield. To drive this point home, her class played a rousing game of *Prove It*, in which students were asked to jot down one fact about themselves on an index card. They could remain standing if they could prove, right then and there, that what they had written was true. "About half sat down," she recalls. Those who remained standing had to sing, dance, show vacation photos stored on their cell phones, and so on. "Some tried to use their friends for proof—'He knows I have a dog,' or 'She knows I went to Paris'—but I would say, 'I need evidence. Where's your proof?'" By the end of the game, only about six kids were still standing, says Eirish-Schofield. "The point was well-taken: What you say may be true, but without evidence, it's just an opinion."

## Understanding the Task

Opinions alone are not sufficient to satisfy the requirements listed in a prompt, observes Barbara Kapinus, a veteran educator who helped develop the Smarter Balanced assessments. She adds, however, that "it's often not that students don't understand the text; it's that they aren't being thorough or thoughtful" when reading the question. For example, students may provide only one piece of evidence from a text when the task called for two. Or they may provide adequate evidence, but offer no clearly stated conclusion. It may be helpful for teachers and students to examine sample prompts together, says Kapinus. "Ask students to share how they would respond to a prompt. Be sure to ask, 'Is there anything more?' and 'Why would you state that?'"

Then, there is the vocabulary. According to Kapinus, students need practice responding to questions using different verbs and then analyzing those responses. Ask, Does the answer reflect the verb's intent?

Such analysis works well as a whole-class activity, says Glass. Try the following:

Divide your class into four or five groups and assign each a verb. Then, have students look around the classroom. What can students *infer* about the classroom? How would they *describe* it? What could they *list*? Ask, What does it mean to *describe* as opposed to *list*?

In this activity, "everybody is focused on something," Glass explains. Each group is surveying the classroom through the lens of the assigned verb. When groups present the results of their activity in class, compare the differences in responses, Glass advises. "If one group is asked to *infer*, but they only *list*, explain why they haven't answered the task."

## Writing with Clarity

Once students understand the task, they can write with its purpose and clarity in mind, says Glass. She recommends using a think-group-share activity (like the one below) to help students assess whether an answer is coherent and complete.

Select any form of text, such as a piece of writing, a lab report, a graphic, or an audio or video recording. Divide the students into groups and pose a task. Ask students to write their responses individually first and then share them with their group members. Students could collectively determine which response is best or synthesize the best of each student's answer. Teachers should then bring students together for a whole-class discussion and a review of the written responses.

It's important to use prompting questions that suggest the criteria needed for a quality response, Glass explains. Ask, for example, Is there sufficient or limited evidence based on the prompt? What is the difference? How does the response show understanding of the

text?

Kapinus adds that students must also become adept at self-monitoring. In "Preparing Students in Writing Responses to Open-Ended Questions," published by TextProject, Inc., she writes that a guiding checklist can give students "hints" about what an answer should include.

Can someone who is not sitting next to me understand my response without asking for clarification?

Does the evidence I've chosen to support my response convince me?


Is my response thorough and complete? What details can I add to make it stronger?

Does my response answer the question? (p. 4)

## Evidence-Based Empowerment

Learning how to respond, in writing, to open-ended questions will help students assess many potential solutions to problems they may confront in the future, experts concur. Stygles hopes students will develop a habit of discernment and tolerance. "I sit with five kids and they give me five different perceptions after having read the same text and providing evidence to prove their arguments," he says. Of the five different perspectives, all are defensible. "I want students to learn that they have to be open to different but valid points of view."

Eirish-Schofield agrees, but adds that she also wants her students to feel empowered to stand their ground. She recalls that, while in college, she wrote a paper about one of Anton Chekov's short stories. "I wrote that the women in the story had no true identity. I remember being very passionate about it, and boy, did I find evidence for my claim!" When her professor returned the paper, he said, "I disagree with you completely, but I had to give you an A because you backed up your opinion so well."

Eirish-Schofield wants her students to have equally memorable experiences. Passion comes "when we're given the choice to explore a topic that lights a spark in us," she says, adding that it's something "extraordinary to see" when students write with such passion—and with evidence-based authority. 

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